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THE TECHNIQUE OF PUBLIC STATISTICAL EXHIBITS.

By Charles J. Storey, *Supervisor of Exhibits, New York State Department of Health.*

The effective presentation of statistics in a public educational exhibit is fraught with great danger if the statistican exhibitor does not put himself in the public's place and design his exhibit from their standpoint rather than from his own. In fact, in more than one exhibit addressed to the poor of our cities and largely attended by them, statistics of a very complicated nature have been shown in an equally complicated manner; and although they, no doubt, occasioned curiosity and remark because of numerous brightly colored lines, they gave no instruction. The exhibitor should first of all study the viewpoint of the audience to be addressed. He must understand the mind of the public.

For an exhibit of statistical material, as for any exhibit, the preliminary plan should center around some real reason for the exhibit. This should be evident throughout the entire exhibit and should join the parts into one continuous whole. There should be a beginning, a climax, where a certain big idea should stand out, and an end.

The end of the exhibit should be as interesting as the beginning, and the climax, or the one thing emphasized above all others, should be so compelling that everyone who enters the exhibition will pass out with it in mind.

Preliminary plans of exhibits are usually good because it is much easier to outline an exhibit on paper than to transpose the same outline into exhibitable form. A recent exhibition had one of the best preliminary plans I have ever seen. It was orderly, in sequence, and complete, but the exhibit installed was just the reverse. In transposing from the written outline to the actual presentation and arrangement, someone had failed. The failure was, no doubt, due to lack of a good detailed working plan around which the exhibit is actually built.

An excellent way to see the exhibit as it will be when installed is to work what may be called *preliminary* filling cards on which every chart, placard, poster, etc. is described or duplicated, and indexed under its appropriate division. Nothing should be left to chance and every word and scheme of presentation should be under inspection and subject to revision as the preparation of the exhibit progresses. A final index of the material may be made when all the material is in and arranged. If this final index is made in duplicate, a good part of it may be used as a copy by the letterer or draftsman.

For a public educational exhibit, statistical information should be presented in the simplest possible manner. I have seen exhibits in the preparation of which the poor public was apparently never considered although the exhibits were avowedly made for them. Few people will bother to read many curves or to study out intricate charts. One of the best ways to get an idea of what the public will read or study is to scan the advertising pages of our good monthly magazines. The advertising man knows better than anyone else today just how much the public will read before the page is turned for something more interesting. He also knows what will attract and how to make it attractive. A telling advertisement does not require intensive study. It is prepared to compel attention and to force a certain idea upon the observer.

An exhibit should be entertaining. No matter how valuable the material presented is, if it is not entertaining, the points are lost. The motive back of an exhibit may be as serious as possible yet it must not be forgotten that the general public attends exhibits not to study but to be amused. The pill must be coated and the most clever exhibitor is he who does this best.

Simplicity and brevity are the keynotes of the successful exhibit. One should have much to select from but should select little. Too many exhibits have lost in effect by the quantity of material used. This is caused by the mistaken idea that the larger the exhibit the more successful it is.

Variety of display is far more important than variety of material. Poor material well displayed will teach more than the best ideas presented in a monotonous and unattractive form. An exhibitor must have many methods of presentation. Uniformity of method is deadly. Everything in an exhibit should be designed in competition with the rest and everything should hit out and attract the observer.

An exhibit should be planned to show only the basic or principal points of the subject. One should not try to present all the arguments. A successful exhibit should be suggestive of the subject rather than complete. The main idea of an exhibit should be to make people think and to arouse interest for further study of the subjects presented. The ideas expressed should connote others. Detailed information may be exhibited in small form as in wall cabinets or albums which those interested may study but which the hurried or disinterested observer can pass by. Many exhibits are filled with inconsequential detail from the midst of which the vital points have a hard task to make themselves known. If an idea cannot be expressed in twenty words, it should be printed in a pamphlet and be given publicity that way.

Then again, big ideas are often too feebly expressed. Vigorous, terse expressions combined with size will put an idea to the forefront. A minute chart will not be noticed no matter how valuable it is. The size and arrangement of an idea to be expressed must be designed in relation to the surrounding exhibits.

The exhibit should have high lights or points of attraction. A certain uniformity of installation is desirable such as backgrounds and framing but variety of display is absolutely necessary. Moving exhibits attract more than anything else. Bright colors also invite attention and lend an attractiveness to an exhibit. White lettering on gray or black is hard on the eyes and not nearly as attractive as black letters on a gray or light buff back-ground. Roman or else block letters are the most readable. It is easier to read words composed of caps and lower case letters than words of all caps. The size of lettering must also be carefully considered and no letters should be used which cannot be easily read at least twenty feet away.

The statistician should not confine his means of expression to charts. Although graphic in form, if made for public exhibition, they will usually be found too complicated, and a row of charts will drive most visitors away. This may be sad news for statisticians but it is, nevertheless, true. Only the very simplest curves should be use and these sparingly. One comparison on a chart is all that should be shown as more confuse. It must be remembered that most people read very few statistics in their day's work. If they can understand them, they find them too wearisome to concentrate their attention on them very long in an exhibit. Where there are simpler things to look at they go to them.

Comparisons by means of lines, either parallel or perpendicular, are easily grasped although, as mentioned, there should be only one point to be brought home. The comparisons should be plainly made and no complicated ''keys'' or systems of notation used.

Maps used to illustrate the geographical distribution of statistics should be utilized as sparingly as charts. In fact any one method of display cannot be employed very many times in an exhibit if the attractive value of it is to be retained. Where a map is used, it should be drawn so that everything is eliminated except the geographical data, such as boundaries and cities, necessary to present the facts or comparison. Showing statistics in a concrete form such as blocks of different sizes is an old and interesting method. Everyone remembers the exhibit of the number of tickets annually sold at subway stations, first shown at the New York Budget Exhibit. A map several feet long of Manhattan and the Bronx was used from which at the designated stations colored sticks of proportionate heights were placed.

To translate statistics into cartoons or posters is a popular and valuable method to bring home necessary information. For instance, one cartoon seen recently pictured a waterfall, the flow of water illustrating the enormous infant mortality, which when compared to the number born (contents of the reservoir) was extremely effective. The figures and percents were lettered in their respective places and the whole taught a lesson which no amount of unaided statistics could have done. When comparisons are made, appeals to past experiences of the observer should be made; that is by the use of homely illustrations.

A striking method of "coating the pill" is to combine statistics with a few words of text. These figures should be round numbers wherever possible as they are more easily and quickly read. Most persons mentally reduce a large number to its nearest thousands or hundreds as the case may be. For the same reason, unless the number or percent is very small, not more than two decimal places should be used and preferably none at all. Cents should be left out of items whenever possible as they serve only to confuse.

In an exhibit where one idea or item is considered many times, a helpful way is to always put the figures or symbol in a distinctive color. This will aid the observer to recognize the figure at once and it will also serve as a starting point for his interest.